

**An Ethnographic Study of Karaoke Users in Hong Kong –
The Four Types of Karaoke Users and
How Their Needs are Satisfied Through Consumption of Karaoke**

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Dedication

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Abstract

This is an ethnographic study of karaoke goers in Hong Kong.

From a glamorous, macro point of view, karaoke represents a socio-cultural phenomenon of a subset of population in Hong Kong. On the other hand, since karaoke is commercial entertainment where people exchange money for gratification and enjoyment, the variety of service offerings provided by karaoke operators plays a complementary role in meeting the consumption goals of karaoke goers. The dynamics in one trying to satisfy his/her consumption goal, be it intended or unplanned, by itself defines an interesting micro topic of study. This thesis sets out to explore how karaoke goers with varying consumption goals behave differently in a karaoke setting with an aim of having their needs satisfied, by introducing *degree of acquaintance* among participants as an intervening variable.

The research starts out with a conceptual framework, which categorizes four different types of karaoke goers – socializers, genuine performers, shy performers and visitors – based on their functional utilization of core and peripheral services offered in a karaoke, in relation to his/her degree of acquaintance with other karaoke participants. This thesis documents the different patterns of consumption demonstrated by each type of karaoke goers and reveals how the offerings of this commercial means of entertainment are deployed in order to produce ‘customized’ satisfactions.

Currently there is no similar ethnographic research in the academic realm documenting a case study in Hong Kong, where karaoke has long developed its root in the popular culture signified by the ‘K-songs’ phenomenon. This is also a pilot study of karaoke goers, approached from the angle of the influences made by other participants on the functional utilization of karaoke offerings.

An Ethnographic Study of Karaoke Users in Hong Kong – The Four Types of Karaoke Users and How Their Needs are Satisfied Through Consumption of Karaoke

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論文摘要

本論文研究香港的卡拉 OK 顧客。

由訂立理論架構開始，根據與卡拉 OK 者的稔熟程度及其相對地對卡拉 OK 的設備及服務的使用及需求，把卡拉 OK 顧客分爲 4 種 – socializers、genuine performers、shy performers 及 visitors。本論文仔細分析不同的卡拉 OK 顧客的消費模式及狀況、並卡拉 OK 的功能，繼而概括他們從使用卡拉 OK 的過程中所得到的滿足感。

卡拉 OK 在香港的流行程度之深，已演變成潮流文化的一部分，當中以 K 歌的流行及普及現象較爲明顯。到目前爲止，學界都鮮有對香港卡拉 OK 顧客的非統計性分析及研究。而本論文亦是首個把卡拉 OK 顧客們，根據他們與其他卡拉 OK 顧客的熟稔程度，繼而影響他們使用卡拉 OK 的狀況的分類研究。

1 The karaoke industry in Hong Kong

1.1 'Karaoke' – the origin and meaning of the term

'Karaoke' is a term from Japan, which can be decomposed into two single Japanese words – 'kara' and 'oke.' 'Kara' translates as empty, while 'oke' is an abbreviation of 'okesutora,' which means orchestra; literally 'kara-oke' refers to 'empty orchestra' (Feiler, 1991). However, as one relates it to the original conception of this Japanese leisure activity, the term 'karaoke' becomes more expressive that it produces the meaning of 'prerecorded musical accompaniment designed for amateur singing' (Lum, 1996). The Merriam-Webster Dictionary gives a precise description from the functional perspective by defining 'karaoke' as 'a device that plays instrumental accompaniments for a selection of songs to which the user sings along.'

The definition suggested by Mitsui and Hosokawa (1998) highlighted two features of karaoke – first, it is an 'electric/electronic apparatus;' and second, karaoke is designed for 'amateur "hidden singers."' Chen (2000) and Drew (2001) elaborated on the first feature by describing the technical karaoke setup that consists of a video monitor for displaying lyrics, wired or wireless microphones connected to a stereo system with voice mixer, and recordings of songs with the vocal track eliminated, which contributes to the very 'kara' of 'karaoke' (Mitsui, 1998). Otake and Hosokawa (1998) supported the latter feature by pointing out that karaoke was first designed for the purpose of entertainment, and the diffusion pattern of this once-novel technology spread from Japanese businessmen who visited karaoke after work for entertainment and relaxation, then crossed the national

borders to the countries around Japan. In a sense, karaoke is very forgiving, as it accommodates those who cannot read music, or those do not sing well in practice (Ogawa, 1997).

Tracing back to 1972 when karaoke first started its operation in Japan (Yano, 1996), derived from the long tradition of public and communal singing in the country, as a less demanding approach that 'enable singers to practice or perform their art without employing live musicians' (Lum, 1998). The karaoke business has thrived and reached out to different countries during its glorious years in the 1980s, notably to the Chinese communities such as Hong Kong, Taiwan and China (Lin & Lu 1992; Li 1992; Lu, 1992). Nowadays karaoke has become one of the most significant and popular leisure activities of the general mass in Hong Kong.

1.2 The development of karaoke business in Hong Kong

The innovation of laser discs (LD), as sound and visual components in digital format had a significant role to play in the popularity and growth of the karaoke business in the early years because of the enhancement it brought into the operation. To some extent, the development of karaoke business in the 1980s was in relation to the availability of LDs with songs in particular languages. According to Otake and Hosokawa (1998), karaoke was not popular in Hong Kong until laser discs with songs in Cantonese, the mother tongue of Hong Kong people, were available in 1988.

As recorded by Lum (1996) in an interview with the former General Manager of Polygram Records Hong Kong, which had once been a leading karaoke software producer in Asia (now dissolved), karaoke in the beginning only appeared in established entertainment resorts such as lounges, discotheques, hotels, restaurants, and clubs, etc. Its existence could be considered as a 'value added' service employed by the owners of those entertainment outlets to flavor their business and attract customers. Very soon the popularity of karaoke turned itself into a 'must-have' in those entertainment venues and became a vital part in the setting that customers would take for granted. However, the consumption habit of karaoke has changed after the arrival of the 'karaoke box' concept in Hong Kong.

1.2.1 The arrival of the 'karaoke box' concept

The invention of the karaoke box concept marked a revolution in the karaoke history. Karaoke box is a small, enclosed space equipped with karaoke hardware with a capacity for five to ten people (Ogawa, 1998). It is said that the earliest 'boxes' appeared for the very first time in Japan in 1985, by recycling used train compartments, and were set up outdoor along main roads on the outskirts of cities, as well as indoor in leisure places and buildings in the amusement areas of cities (Mitsui and Hosokawa, 1998; Ogawa, 1998). The evolution had started from there until it evolved into the format of today. The size of karaoke boxes varies from accommodating only two to up to one hundred people, while the standard capacity is for seven to eight people.

In general, people welcome the privacy and freedom they can enjoy in karaoke boxes. This explains very well the swift boom in the number of karaoke boxes and visitors to Japan

since 1986 and soon it became the standard format in which most karaoke establishments in Japan operate. Since 1992, Hong Kong investors copied the success of the Japanese karaoke box model and used similar formats in setting up karaoke establishments here. These individual karaoke outlets, each composed of many karaoke boxes, are different from karaoke of the early days. Providing enclosed, 'private' venue and karaoke equipments for consumers to enjoy singing as an entertainment is considered as the mainstream service of these new setups.

1.3 The business model

1.3.1 The soul of the business

In principle, karaoke hardware (with reference to Mitsui and Hosokawa's term of 'electric/electronic apparatus') and an enclosed room (where singing is supposed to take place) serve as the standard must-have offering on the service menu of karaoke providers. These are the key, fundamental offerings without which karaoke outlets cannot operate.

Karaoke is a single-minded product, with singing being the major component of the karaoke experience. To induce from this notion, karaoke hardware serves as the very core in the business model where consumers pay money to exchange for the right to use the hardware for a defined period of time. Karaoke hardware refers to the technical karaoke setup that consists of visual display, audio setup including wired or wireless microphones, a stereo system with voice mixer, and an abundant supply of new and old favorite songs with the vocal track eliminated. To stay competitive and aligned to market dynamics,

karaoke providers have to keep pace with the ever-advancing technology and enhance their equipment accordingly.

On the other hand, the boom of business arisen since the invention of the karaoke box concept reflects a phenomenon that consumers prefer singing in an enclosed and private space, from which people who do not belong to one's circle of acquaintance are excluded. The sense of privacy has become part of the experience where consumers generate, and even enhance, satisfaction.

1.3.2 On the fringe

However, some peripheral, value-added services have been introduced to consumers due to keen market competition. Those services are considered peripheral in the sense that they neither directly function with the karaoke machine nor provide private singing environment per se. Food and beverages (including alcoholic drinks), access to both terrestrial and non-terrestrial television programs, media events, loyalty programs, game facilities, multi-media gadgets etc. are examples of these value-added services. They are mostly marketing driven, to generate revenues, enhance consumer satisfaction, establish trends for brand differentiation and resonate with their young dominant customers. Karaoke providers must improve the quality of these services continuously to establish customer loyalty and increase profitability.

1.4 The market in figures

The karaoke business in Hong Kong operates in a duopoly model, where the major share of the market is split by two key players, California Red Karaoke Box and Neway Karaoke Box, with the rest shared by several smaller players. The market underwent dramatic changes during the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in early 2003 shrinking the number of operators to two, down from 15 before the SARS outbreak. Thanks to economic recovery soon after SARS, the two keen players swiftly expanded their business through acquisitions and development of new outlets. To date, California Red Karaoke Box operates 17 outlets and Neway Karaoke Box has 22 premises in Hong Kong.

Karaoke is not for everyone since by its nature, it does not attract those who do not follow the local popular song culture. However, the popularity of this activity in Hong Kong should not be ignored. The karaoke market in Hong Kong is rather young dominant – primary customers are middle or lower class white collar workers or students – between the ages of 15 and 30. This age group constitutes 1,945,800 or 28.1 percent of Hong Kong's population, a significant figure. Although financial figures are unavailable, industry insiders estimate that karaoke outlets have aggregate foot traffic of 28 to 30 million each year. This is equivalent to an average of 15 annual visits per capita for those between 15 and 30 years of age.

2 Karaoke as a means of communication

2.1 A unique medium

It is too short-sighted to consider karaoke merely as a means of communication as it achieves more than one would expect of a typical, functional communication tool. Mitsui and Hosokawa (1998) suggested that karaoke is 'more than just a machine that allows one to be a star for three minutes. The satisfaction and personal pleasure that one can experience through karaoke, the musical technologies, and the collective memories, are those that worth more.' This comment implies that karaoke does not only produce messages, but an experience since audiences are actively involved in the consumption of the medium through 'emotional involvement at a personal level' (Chen, 2000).

Music distribution companies including BMG, Sony Music, Emperor Entertainment Group and Warner Music, etc. license popular songs to karaoke operators, in attempt to increase public exposure and awareness of singers and to generate significant royalty income. As a result, karaoke serves as a platform to promote the popular music culture, with its role equally, if not more, important as other mass media mediums such as radio and terrestrial television. Significantly, karaoke has a unique characteristic that requires personal involvement of the consumers, changing their role from a message recipient to 'participant.'

2.2 The dual role of participants

To a certain extent, karaoke requires high degree of participation from people who take part in this activity. Unlike many other social occasions where participants are supposed to play a single role in the setting, karaoke participants have dual roles to play – as audience members (message recipients) to apprehend and transform any symbolic elements into sense-making meanings and as performers (message conveyers) to construct and deliver ideas through singing. This double identity lies in the fact that participants are expected to move between two areas of action in a karaoke setting. The two areas of action are known as the 'stage area' and the 'audience area' as suggested by Lum (1996).

The stage area is a space where singing performance takes place. Performers play the conveyer role through the utilization of karaoke hardware. On the other hand, the audience area is a space where others in a karaoke box relax and witness the karaoke performance being conducted in the stage area. They play the recipient role utilizing selective peripheral services provided in the karaoke setting. The audience area is also where most of the social interactions take place. Participants travel between the two areas switching between the two modes during the whole karaoke experience, though the roles are not always distinguishable from one another and the physical setting of a karaoke room does not help differentiates the roles.

2.3 A cultural practice

Karaoke embodies cultural practice. Lum (1996) pointed out that 'karaoke embodies a process of human interactions and practices whereby certain values, meanings, or social realities are created, maintained and transformed as part of a culture – a particular way of life.'

Obviously people with different national backgrounds practice and associate with this means of communication in their own cultural contexts, making it an interesting topic of study from an academic point of view. For example, karaoke in Taiwan was a male-dominant entertainment popular in night clubs when it first entered the country in the 1980s where middle age men were the major customers (Otake and Hosokawa 1998), as compared to Japan where karaoke became a hobby across age groups due to the traditional root of public and communal singing. Drew (2001) wrote that karaoke infiltrated the United States in 1990, where karaoke bars were established in small music venues with emcees to encourage public performances and audience members to sing along in high spirits; at the same time, the karaoke box concept that encouraged private singing environment was swiftly earning its popularity in a number of Asian countries.

That statement made by Lum (1996) does not mean that karaoke only embodies cultural practice in a macro, national scale. The influences also take place among subcultures in which participants share similar demographic characteristics, social status and background, beliefs, etc. Chinese Americans took karaoke as a forum to construct their social identities

and cultural connection, especially upon migration to a foreign country (Lum, 1996) is a case in point. This research study focuses more on this area of cultural embodiment.

The karaoke business is seen as a people business (Lum, 2001), with people being the essence of the business; this activity becomes meaningful through maintaining one's life and allowing people to do what they want in the karaoke setting. Inferred from the above-mentioned reasons for people going to karaoke, two major social practices (phenomena) are noticed through the consumption of karaoke – consumption of one's own identity and social gathering.

Briefly mentioned in the previous section is that karaoke has been employed by many agencies among others as a cultural attraction. Lum (1996) documented in a journal feature, "In Search of a Young K-pop Star and the Core Values and Identity in Chinese America" a few case studies of first generation Chinese American immigrants in the United States. Lum (1996) also studied the cultural identity of Chinese immigrants in the United States. Lum (1996) also studied the cultural identity of Chinese immigrants in the United States.

3 The social products of karaoke

Karaoke has multi-purposes with its components accommodating different motivations at one time – leisure social gathering, interpersonal contacts for business, releasing pressure, satisfying the desire of performing, singing practices, recreation, company gathering, etc. (Chen, 2000). More so, karaoke is generally perceived as a healthy, ageless, as well as a politically and morally acceptable mode of entertainment in Hong Kong.

The karaoke business is seen as a people business (Drew, 2001), with people being the centre of this business; this activity becomes meaningful through constructing one's true self and allowing people to anchor their social lives in the karaoke setting. Induced from the abovementioned reasons for people going to karaoke, two major social products (phenomena) are created through the consumption of karaoke – construction of one's own identity and social gathering.

Briefly mentioned in the previous section is that karaoke has been employed by many overseas immigrants as a cultural connection. Lum (1996) documented in his publication, 'In Search of a Voice: Karaoke and the Construction of Identity in Chinese America,' a few case studies of first generation Chinese American immigrants, vividly exemplify how karaoke remedially addresses cultural shock and 'construct a voice of their own' in a social environment where one does not originally belong to.

On the other hand, karaoke also creates 'a home from home,' as described by Merry White, a Boston University sociologist and a research fellow at Harvard University's Edwin O. Reischauer Institute of Japanese Studies. It is considered as a better place than home to entertain guests, and 'an important alternative space' to maintain social relations with people who are not in the same family or clan. Social networks are formed around a common interest in karaoke (Lum, 1996).

Another social product brought along by karaoke, specifically to the scene of Hong Kong, is the phenomenon of 'K-songs,' which has created significant impact on consumers' mode of music appreciation, the marketing efforts of the local music distribution companies, hence the overall music culture. Karaoke has long been playing an intermediary role between the music distribution companies and consumers. The operators pay the copyright fees of the songs and music videos to be broadcasted within the karaoke premises, becoming an important marketing channel to promote popular songs produced by the music distribution companies; on the other hand, karaoke also represents preference of the consumers as well as market trend through the karaoke billboard statistics. The popularity of karaoke since the early 1990s has gradually modified the local popular music climate, where melodic songs with easy-to-sing choruses are greatly in demand. Music companies accommodate this 'trend' and heavily produce songs meeting these expectations, resulting in the unique 'K-songs' phenomenon in Hong Kong.

4 The conceptual framework

The conceptual framework sets out to identify the varying behaviors and activities performed by karaoke users in four situations, defined by two major variables – *degree of acquaintance* and *functional utilization of karaoke services*. A major share of this thesis will be devoted to the ethnographic study of the four types of karaoke users conceptualized in this framework – to probe deeper into the dynamics between karaoke and construction of identity, as argued by Lum (1996), in the context of Hong Kong; as well as to bring new insights in the other ways needs are satisfied through the consumption of this particular means of entertainment.

4.1 The variables

Degree of acquaintance is defined as the level of familiarity or intimacy between participants, ranging from high (very intimate) to low (newly acquainted) on a continuum. Apparently, familiarity renders cohesiveness within the group, thus distinguishing ‘ingroups’ from the ‘outgroups’ and makes an overall behavioral influence on the way people interact with each other. This generally applies to many social occasions, including an enclosed karaoke setting.

Functional utilization of karaoke services refers to the consumption of the karaoke hardware or services by the participants. As pointed out in the above section, the core service of karaoke is the hardware (in other words, the technical karaoke setup that allows participants to sing)

and an enclosed room (where singing takes place). The two are the tangible and primary reasons for karaoke visits. On the other hand, other provided services which function to enrich the karaoke experience are considered peripheral. Functional utilization of karaoke services is also measured on a continuum, advancing from core to diversified. The term 'diversified' employed in this theoretical framework literally means the use of both core and peripheral karaoke services, though in practice it does not necessarily refer to utilization of every item on the service menu.

4.2 Validation of the importance of variables

Two arguments validate the significance of *degree of acquaintance* and *functional utilization of karaoke services* as the key variables in establishing the conceptual framework for this ethnographic study of Hong Kong karaoke goers.

Lum, as one of the well-respected scholars in the field who has conducted profound cultural studies on karaoke goers, pointed out the significance of factoring in the psychographics of the participants (as in 'general social experience' and 'everyday life') when decoding their interpretation of karaoke experiences (1996), hence undermining the role of demographic factors (such as age, gender, ethnicity, educational attainment, etc.) in the ethnographic, behavioral study of karaoke goers. This is substantiated by the neutral nature of karaoke, targeting the general public with extremely adaptable offerings that are suitable across ages and genders. This further downplays the role of demographics in marking apparent differences in one's intention and behavior when visiting karaoke.

The cause-and-effect relationship between one's familiarity with other participants and the activities taking place in a karaoke room, hence the diversity of karaoke services being utilized, is generalized by researcher based on observation and active participation. This notion is further confirmed by interviewing respondents. Karaoke is a people-centered experience that requires active involvement from participants to create gratification and enjoyment which can be attained through consumption of karaoke services and/or interaction with other participants, thereby validating the importance of the human factor – *degree of acquaintance* falls into the league. While it is too general to conclude that *degree of acquaintance* itself or the effect factor, *functional utilization of karaoke services*, predominately explains a karaoke experience, yet both are identified as relatively more important and meaningful in categorizing karaoke goers into types (each with significant differences), and thick-describing a karaoke experience in which significant human interactions are involved.

4.3 The framework

This theoretical framework suggests an interplay between the two variables mentioned above. It is supposed that the degree of acquaintance among participants makes a behavioral influence on their consumption patterns (as is functional utilization) of karaoke services.

To graphically map out the types of karaoke goers, one of the axes indicates the degree of acquaintance among the participants, ranging from *high* to *low*; while the other axis represents the utilization of karaoke services, ascending from *core* to *diversified*. Graph 1 in

the Appendix illustrates the four distinctive types that graphically appear in each of the segments: *socializers*, *genuine performers*, *shy performers* and *visitors*.

This framework is dynamic in nature, meaning that participants are subject to shift of role at any time, be it a subtle transfer that happens with a gradual change of time or an immediate one that takes place in a single karaoke experience. The right to shift freely between the stage area and the audience area is ensured. Also, participants may put on different hats in different karaoke experiences. To illustrate, one may play the role of shy performer when singing with a group of close friends this afternoon and shift to the role of socializers when visiting karaoke with business partners in the evening.

4.3.1 The socializers

Socializers refer to participants who sit in a karaoke box with people who do not come from their personal circle of acquaintance. The karaoke event may very well be the first occasion the participants encounter each other or a business tie-in social gathering. Having in mind that the invisible walls in between the groups are waiting to be knocked down, participants tend to make the most of an enclosed karaoke room to socialize and build relationship with each other. This ice-breaking or relationship building activity usually takes place in the audience area where a significant amount of peripheral karaoke services are utilized.

4.3.2 The genuine performers

Genuine performers refer to participants who are heavy user of core karaoke services even though they are surrounded by people with whom they are not comfortably familiar. They require minimal ice-breaking time to sing confidently in front of strangers. The concept of enclosed space does not bother genuine performers as they desire their performances to reach out to as many audiences as possible. Professional singers are classified as genuine performers. Most genuine performers have gone through a learning curve starting as shy performers before they can stand confidently in the stage area.

4.3.3 The shy performers

Shy performers enjoy karaoke experience with people whom they are familiar. The more intimate the relationship, the more satisfaction the participants gain from the singing experience. Heavy utilization of core karaoke services is expected.

4.3.4 The visitors

Visitors perform various different activities inside karaoke, making use of available equipment, items and services. They do not have regular set purposes each time they visit karaoke, that means, their reasons for going are different at different time, depending on their needs. Compared to other types of karaoke goers mentioned in the above sections, visitors consider karaoke as casual entertainment with the singing part as less important. For visitors, peripheral services provided in karaoke play more prominent roles.

5 The Research Design

5.1 Methodology

This research study is extensively covered by qualitative research methods, particularly interviews, active participation and observation.

5.1.1 Interviews

25 individual interviews were conducted from April to July 2005. The pool of informants was comprised of Cantonese-speaking karaoke goers of both genders. Informants were selected based on their consumption patterns and perceived intentions of visiting karaoke. The researcher had also identified some key persons who possessed interesting stories to bring deeper insight in the understanding of various karaoke experiences.

All informants were asked a number of questions prior to the interview to determine their predominant user type from the four formulated in the conceptual framework – socializers, genuine performers, shy performers and visitors. However, the nature of the conceptual framework presumes the possibility of multiple categories, which entails the challenge of assigning a single user type to some of the informants. In such cases, they were asked to share their experience in different occasions.

The preliminary, investigative questions and the propositions are listed below:

1) Question: Who do you usually go karaoke with? When/why do you go to karaoke?

Purposes: To prompt the informant to establish various scenarios of his/her karaoke visits and to look for specific drivers or motivation for going to karaoke.

2) Question: What would you do in a karaoke room? What is your proportion of singing to other activities during a karaoke visit in general?

Purposes: To anticipate the various activities being carried out in a karaoke room and to identify the predominant user type(s) of the informant.

3) Question: How much are the following statements in agreement with your karaoke experience: a) karaoke is for releasing emotion; b) karaoke is a pastime; c) karaoke is a place for socializing and networking; d) karaoke is a performance ground.

Purposes: To reconfirm the predominant user type(s) of the informant and to sniff for hints for further investigation into certain scenarios.

In addition to the 25 individual interviews, a conversation was made with senior management personnel of the largest karaoke box chain in Hong Kong for a general understanding of the market from a business angle.

5.1.2 Active participation and observation

Considering that interviews alone were not sufficient to satisfy the ethnographic approach of this research study, active participation and observation were employed with an aim to establishing a stronger ground of validation.

Some of the individual interviews were done in karaoke outings, therefore the behavior of the informants was observed to authenticate their verbal comments and responses to the

questions. The researcher has also joined the informants for a few karaoke sessions, especially for studying the karaoke experience of socializers.

5.2 The informants

Among the 25 informants, there were seven socializers, six shy performers, four genuine performers and eight visitors in the pool.

The table below illustrates the profiles of the 25 informants:

	<u>Age</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Personal characteristics</u>	<u>Karaoke experience/perception</u>
1)	22	Male	Native Chinese but educated abroad; very into singing	A typical shy performer; visits karaoke at least once per week (either alone or with a friend) for singing practice
2)	30+	Female	Eurasian but understand both spoken and written Chinese; a sales manager; very sociable; likes singing	Karaoke is her favorite venue for both business and (personal) social gatherings
3)	27	Male	Local Chinese; does not sing very well so karaoke is not a favorite place for leisure	Karaoke to him is a business tool to build relationship with business partners or clients
4)	28	Male	Local Chinese; big fan of local popular songs; spent nights in karaoke after breaking up with his girl friend of 10 years	Seeks emotional relief; karaoke is his healing sanctum
5)	24	Female	Local Chinese; not a frequent karaoke goer; visits occasionally (once or twice every two months) with friends	Does not sing much, but very interested in the music videos; cares a lot about the food and beverage
6)	23	Male	Local Chinese; not a very confident person; worked in a karaoke lounge as disc jockey	Considers himself as a karaoke king; likes showing off in karaoke
7)	40+	Female	A mother of two teenagers; an open-minded housewife	Usually visits karaoke in the afternoon as a pastime with other tai-tai's

8)	29	Female	Local Chinese; has a very stressful job; has to deal with family troubles from time to time	Visits karaoke to relax and de-stress; sees it as an alternative to gym and spa
9)	27	Female	Local Chinese; busy work life leaving her not much leisure time	Top of her mind, karaoke is for social gathering
10)	31	Male	Local Chinese; leading an unexciting life (as per his description); hangs out with friends on weekends	Runs into a karaoke with friends when he has nothing else to do
11)	23	Male	Local Chinese; sings very well; wants to be a professional singer	Looks forward to meeting a talent hunter in karaoke
12)	23	Female	Native Chinese but educated abroad; enjoys singing	Visits karaoke at least twice a month (either alone or with a friend) for singing practice
13)	27	Female	Does not sing well but likes it though; has a stressful work life	Visits karaoke on her own occasionally and just sings
14)	40+	Male	A medical professional; father of two young girls; has visited karaoke for the very first time recently	Karaoke is a trendy concept; the singing experience seems fun and interesting
15)	19	Male	A student; fan of local popular songs	Visits karaoke occasionally due to limited pocket money; enjoys 'soaking' in the mood created by the lyrics and the music
16)	28	Male	Native Chinese but educated abroad; enjoy hanging out with friends	Karaoke provides a perfect environment (i.e. a room) for gathering with close friends
17)	25+	Male	Native Chinese but educated abroad; sings very well; frequent karaoke goer	A place to enjoys his singing; usually goes with friends; always monopolizes the microphone
18)	23	Female	Studies abroad but comes back to Hong Kong many times in a year; outgoing; a party lover	Karaoke is a place to meet new friends
19)	45+	Female	Mother of a 20+ year old who introduced her the karaoke activity	Karaoke is a place that makes her feel trendy and young
20)	24	Female	Local Chinese; just graduated; a typical value-hunter	Karaoke gives good value, visits frequently for K-Lunch

21)	31	Male	Asian Chinese; business owner; very sociable	Karaoke is a useful tool to please clients or to bid for business
22)	28	Male	Local Chinese; currently taking singing lesson	Karaoke is a stage
23)	28	Female	Native Chinese but educated abroad; fun seeker; enjoys hanging out with a big group of friends	Likes the idea of having an enclosed room which gives a good level of freedom
24)	31	Male	Local Chinese; football fan; visits karaoke occasionally; but heavily during football season	Appreciates a place that gives privacy and is big enough to host a group of friend
25)	26	Female	Studied abroad; always hosting or coordinating social gatherings	Karaoke is a party place

5.3 Scope of study

This research study applies to the outlets that operate in the most popular karaoke box model within the geographic boundary of Hong Kong, focusing only on the activities that take place within a karaoke box. Experiences or activities extending out of the karaoke premises do not fall into the scope of this research study.

6 Findings and analysis

6.1 The socializers

6.1.1 A social room

Karaoke is said to be a favorite hangout place of many local people, to some extent it even surpasses restaurants, bars and pubs, nightclubs, discos, etc. as a preferred choice for social gatherings. Chen (2000) defined karaoke as a 'physical and social space of leisure consumption,' where people 'regard each other as friends' (Ogawa 1998). Lum (1996) also suggested that the participants in a karaoke event are there 'both to entertain and be entertained by others.'

Different karaoke goers have different opinions on what they like about karaoke. In general, it possesses two comparative advantages which justify its status as the most preferred place for social gathering: it offers rooms in various sizes to accommodate from two to up to 100 people which gives flexibility and also a high degree of privacy; it offers a variety of alternative activities to singing at affordable and reasonable prices, so as to satisfy the different needs of different people. This mutual entertainment encourages a certain degree of bonding among participants in the scene. Many people share the same opinion:

"Karaoke is on the top of our list whenever we need to plan a reunion for a big group of people, all with their own agenda and preference. Nobody would disagree with the idea of karaoke gathering. It is also a wallet-friendly choice of entertainment. At an affordable price, you can have a private room, far cheaper than renting a hotel function

room or doing private party at restaurant. Also, you can eat, sing, chat, and play games... all under the same roof."

In fact, karaoke box has become an interesting topic in the discussion of social place, in the sense that it crosses over the concepts of *public* and *private* space in a non-conflicting manner, with both defined in relative terms. By *public* it refers to karaoke as an area accessible by anyone who is willing to pay a required minimum fee in exchange for the right to use services available at the premises. On the other hand, it is also *private* because each group of participants is assigned a karaoke box, which is an enclosed area that isolates one group from another and promises a given level of freedom and privacy within the room.

The crossover explains why people prefer karaoke when they need to plan a gathering for people with whom they are not very familiar (or do not even know). A party or a gathering that takes place at karaoke is very different than a home party. The social code of karaoke gathering is very embracing to welcome participants to bring their own friends without worrying too much that it will intrude the privacy of the host or upset the enjoyable atmosphere that has existed among a close group of friends. It takes advantage of the *public* dimension of karaoke to expand one's network of connections and make new friends (horizontal approach). Conversely, a group of people, with different level of acquaintance among themselves are brought together in an enclosed area to share some activities. In this context, *public* thinking stops and *private* thinking begins (at least in relative terms). Here we are aware of the *private* within the *public* area, denoted by the invisible distance between people inside the room and those outside. In other words, the unfamiliar people now

become relatively neighborly. When participants share activities among themselves, relationships are built, deepened and strengthened (vertical approach). This implies a *private* nature of karaoke.

Socializers, as introduced in the theoretical framework of this study, refer to participants who sit in a karaoke box with people who do not come from one's personal circle of acquaintance. The karaoke event may very well be the first occasion the participants encounter each other. Their intention, be it strong or weak, is to make use of the event to knock down the invisible walls between one another and build relationship with the strangers inside the room.

Singing remains an important feature inside the karaoke room, yet it becomes less individualistic with more opportunities opened up for duet or team performance. On the other hand, socializers start to participate in other non-singing activities that are equally enjoyable and interesting, and most importantly, they are able to engage everyone inside the karaoke room. Therefore, a significantly heavy utilization of peripheral karaoke services is anticipated with most activities taking place in the audience area instead of the stage area.

The stage area limits the number of participants it can fit at one time, restricted by technical equipment with only three microphones provided. An etiquette exists in the use of karaoke stereo system when strangers are presence in a karaoke gathering – the allocation of the use of microphones becomes more liberal and fair in principle, with each participant have an equal opportunity to sing if no one else refuses the microphone, as none of the participants

want to arouse any displeasure or leave a bad impression in front of the new acquaintances. Even when it appears that one or a few of the participants control the machine most of the time, other participants are always welcomed to jump in for duets or group performances without feeling obtrusive or embarrassed.

Although everyone tries to be magnanimous, the karaoke machine is seldom left unattended. Of course singing lovers will not miss the low period of the karaoke system to perform their preferred songs; at the time everyone is busy (e.g. when eating), the machine will be used to play songs (with vocals) as background music. Music always plays a very important function in social gatherings as it is a good source of relaxing and uplifting of moods and emotions. It builds the right atmosphere that everyone enjoys and fosters conversation more easily. Music videos are an important element in the scene here especially since there are not enough microphones for everyone, leaving most of the participants 'idle' to stare at the television screen. Music videos engage idle eyes, and depict stories that complement understanding of songs. Music videos are done in a very different way from dramas – they are very creative, filmy, aesthetic and spectacular – and are meant to capture images and to draw the minds of the audience into the scene. They also depict some very illusionary scenes to leave considerable room for imagination and fantasy when audience produces their own meaning and interpretation. Music videos also serve as a good subject of discussion among participants; conversations are even carried on after the karaoke session. This is especially true to music videos (and songs) that highlight very controversial subjects. The music video of the new song 'Rolls and Royce' (勞斯·萊詩) by female popular singer Denise Ho (何韻詩) has recently generated a lot of during- and after-karaoke discussions. The song is about the dilemma, struggles and grief of

discovering the love of the singer is also engaged in a homosexual relationship. The music video features seductive scenes played up in a very vague but dramatic way, producing debates among audiences.

In formal or informal gatherings singing became a form of sharing, of showing one's active membership within a group (Yano, 1996). An interesting phenomenon is noted in some of these singing gatherings. Sometimes a host would initiate group singing, usually after an hour or two have passed when energy levels inside the karaoke room are low. All the participants are asked to join together to sing in a song or a medley of songs. This is usually initiated by the host or a few of other participants who tend to be more extroverted. The microphones are passed around to give everyone a chance to sing up before the song ends and to make sure nobody is left out or feels alienated. When asked about the criteria of the choice of songs for group singing, the story depicted in the song is not one that springs to mind, but upbeat and cheerful music that lifts and wakes everyone up. Although it is not forced, this is an activity that quietly demands participation from everyone in the room. Very few would refuse the microphone when it is their turn for fear that it may immediately disrupt the cheerful spirit among the participants. Even those who hesitate to sing in front of people would still use the microphone for one to two verses before passing it on. Group singing usually is not introduced at the beginning, especially when the participants are still not very familiar with each other and are too shy to join their hands together. Skillful host would suggest a group song in the middle of the event, leaving enough time for the newly acquaintance to melt away anxiety associated with meeting strangers.

Apart from music, food and beverage also take up an important functional role in social connection in karaoke. A wide variety of food and beverage are offered by karaoke providers, not only to proactively respond to market demand, but also to seize a larger share of business from the catering industry. Buffet dinners and set meals in good portions are offered at very attractive prices. This has expanded the business of karaoke to cover not only entertainment but also dining. Socializers have a boarder definition of karaoke experience by expanding it from singing only to include food and drinks as well. To them, food and beverages are equally important as karaoke machines, and they are considered must-haves for the karaoke event. They expect well-planned menus with numerous choices to choose from, especially for snack foods. They also like to order a number of small dishes (e.g. snack food, finger food) to share among participants. However small the gesture is, sharing food always facilitates cultivation of friendship among a group of people. Socializing can be done through sniffing through the menu and discussing on what foods to order, pairing up to sweep the buffet table, etc. These are all very good warm up exercises between new acquaintances. Deipnosophists, who are skilled at across-the-table chit chat, would be a plus here, as they know how to make good use of eating time to build relationships, turning it into an enjoyable moment of everyone.

6.1.2 Power tension

Business social gatherings refer to meetings and/or activities that take place outside working area and hours, with all the participants bonded together strictly for business reasons. Business social gatherings cross company lines (for example, in a client-supplier relationship), or they can be intra-company events where colleagues from the same

company meet. Business social gatherings create opportunities for extending business relationships into more constructive and personal ones. 'Relationship keeps business' is an old saying which explains the advantage of having a constructive and personal relationship to maintain good business connections. To a certain extent, it is regarded as an obligated 'job requirement' for those pursuing career advancement. Sacrificing personal time to nurture business relationship sounds reasonable especially in the highly competitive business environment in Hong Kong.

Karaoke is always a place business relationship is built, though most of the time, no business is discussed inside karaoke rooms. This has been a common phenomenon particularly among the Chinese-speaking group in Hong Kong, owing to the fact that 90% of songs in the karaoke database are in Chinese languages (Cantonese and Mandarin), and the traditional Chinese belief in 'guanxi.' Karaoke is a preferred choice over other dining and entertainment options because it offers both dialects, plus a comfortable level of privacy is always assured.

The existence of high end karaoke outlets has slightly changed the scene of business socializing. Business gatherings used to take place at expensive nightclubs or pubs. This was a norm, and the venue itself somehow reflected the status of the host. High end karaoke has now become an alternative that is generally regarded as more healthy.

Karaoke gatherings in a business context normally have high attendance for face giving reasons. Invitees tend not to decline any invitation to protect their goodwill and not to upset the formal business relationship. An intra-company karaoke gathering may

encourage an even higher chance of attendance if competition among employees exists for fear that the absence would lose an advantage to one's competitors. However, no matter how undesirable these singing parties are, they are still considered to be preferable to social gatherings that take place elsewhere:

"I personally prefer karaoke to business dinner. Not only because I like singing, I found it more relaxing in a karaoke room, with songs that everyone knows and they can sing along. It is easier to talk because people would let their guards down in such an environment."

The music and songs in karaoke serve this purpose of creating a relaxing and entertaining environment where people tend to be less inhibited. Credit should not only be given to the powerful effect of music, but also the karaoke machine that requires a high level of involvement from and interactivity with participants so people unconsciously and naturally switches on their 'entertainment mode' and switch off their 'defensive mode.' It is an opportunity to bring relationships to a friendlier level where it may be a comparative advantage for business colleagues to bond. Some would even consider this as a good chance to collect inside information skillfully and subtly as 'the guard is down.' Most of the time however, situations are not so ideal but tend to be more complicated and difficult to deal with. When seasoned business socializers remain protective, progress can only be made slowly; it is a long shot. The level of trust development is correlated to the number of such gatherings.

Usually everyone is very polite in business karaoke gathering and no one would try to occupy the microphones for more than two consecutive songs. No one tries to be

controlling. When one song is done, the singers will put down the microphones on the table so other participants may use them. The song list is literary owned by everyone in the room. Even if one chooses a song, the next or the previous song is usually chosen by others. Participants would also suggest or invite others to sing. It could be said as 'karaoke etiquette' in act, similar to 'table manner' where everyone is expected to behave in a pre-approved way.

Participants in a business karaoke gathering tend to be conscious of *power*. This is especially obvious when there is a power hierarchy among the participants (e.g. employer and employees, manager and secretary). The power tension is clearly displayed through the distribution of resources in the karaoke room:

"Last time about 12 of us went to karaoke with our boss and her two teenage daughters, we did not get to sing too much – we dare not too, especially when her two daughters kept singing songs after songs. We 12 of us altogether roughly sang no more than one-third of songs. Most of the time we just sat there to help select songs and ordered food."

Although the teenage daughters are neither a part of the business environment nor they understand the rules and culture, the above example reflects the scene of a typical corporate karaoke gathering where some office rules are applied even after office hours and respect is extended to people whom do not have direct control over the subordinates concerned.

6.2 The visitors

Karaoke lends to the inspiration of 'third place,' after Starbucks the well known worldwide coffee chain stores. According to the definition of the term originally developed by a Florida sociologist, Oldenburg (1997), a 'third place' is a 'distinctive informal' public place for people to come together. It makes one feel like home, nourishes social relationships and a 'diversity of human contact,' helps build a sense of place and community, promotes companionship and encourages sociability. Although karaoke originated from the historical culture of public and communal singing in Japan, it has gradually evolved into a fusion of ideas to include not only the celebration of the singing culture, but also a sense of social feeling.

The 'third place' romance is not a planned and intended agenda of the local karaoke the way it is of Starbucks, neither the concept has been captured in their brand identity or advertising. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that karaoke plays the role of a 'third place,' and it shares the characteristic of Starbucks as being a 'socially democratic' (Simmons 2004) environment, where business people, housewives, young people and anyone are welcomed.

6.2.1 Karaoke as a multi-purpose room

Karaoke is a multi-purpose room, for the type of users that are categorized as visitors in this research study. They perform various different activities inside karaoke, making use of the equipments, items and services that are available there. They do not have regular set purposes each time they visit karaoke, meaning that their reasons for going are different at different time, depending on their needs. Compared to other types of karaoke goes

mentioned in the above sections, visitors consider karaoke as relatively more casual entertainment, with the singing part as less important. In the case of visitors, the peripheral services provided in karaoke have more prominent roles to play.

One of the very popular activities that take place inside the multi-purpose room is watching sports games. Unlike other countries, sports games in Hong Kong are not offered on terrestrial television channels. They are available at paid television channels only, which cover no more than fifty percent of households here in the city, due to low popular demand (low demand versus terrestrial television channels because of its paid nature of contents) and technical limitations which have restricted its supply. Owing to these reasons, during international sports seasons, bars, pubs and karaoke expect to be full, where the paid sports channels are available at the price of a dinner or even only that of a drink. Karaoke is the most favorite hangout place during those seasons. It is because of space, which is temporary used by the visitors, counts. The temporary occupation of the karaoke room with a group of close friends makes the gathering a more enjoyable one.

People would also go to karaoke mainly for enjoying the lunch at very attractive price. The meal is the hero here; it is the main reason people visit karaoke. It does not mean that they do not touch on other things inside the karaoke room, but they are placed in a less important position. For example, many office workers like to visit karaoke during lunch break for 'K-Lunch,' meaning within the one-hour of lunch break they can visit karaoke for lunch and also have a chance to sing if time allows. It is a good deal for this group of price-sensitive consumers, where they think they are 'hitting two birds with one stone.' On the other hand, some people would visit karaoke for drinking parties, where a bunch of friends

will get together, chat and take alcoholic drinks. Some people would also visit karaoke to watch television shows together, even though they are also accessible at home.

One of the large groups of visitors is housewives, which are typically called 'Tai-Tai.' Those karaoke-going housewives are not necessarily those Tai-Tai's who have married to rich husbands, but they do not have a day-time job which allows them with ample of time to enjoy lives. As an alternative to mahjong or shopping, housewives visit karaoke for fun and for gathering with other Tai-Tai's who share very similar background. Singing is one of the many activities they do in karaoke. In fact they are not very keen on singing, because they do not know much about the latest popular songs. Even if they do, they are trying to be conservative and avoid performing any of those songs that they regarded as of 'contemporary' culture. They are aware of the invisible distance between their old days and the present, and try to keep this 'equilibrium' without being upset by it. One purpose of housewives going to karaoke is to keep track of the latest new songs to keep themselves updated to the popular song culture, and to shorten the distance between them and their next generation.

So why people like going out instead of staying homes for entertainment? This is because Hong Kong is a very pressurized place, for its face pace of life and small living space among average households. People tend to go out on weekends or during holidays to shopping centres, cinemas or other places. Also, they are very mobilized. This is the result of democratizing of geographical areas: everyone is equal in every metropolitan cluster, and every metropolitan cluster tends to the needs of a wide spectrum of customers. Social democracy is one of the city's characteristic, need not to be created like the more

6.3 The genuine performers

Genuine performers refer to participants who register heavy use of core karaoke services even though they are surrounded by people with whom they are not comfortably familiar. They require minimal ice-breaking time to sing confidently in front of strangers. The concept of enclosed space does not bother genuine performers, as they desire their performances to reach out to as many audience members as possible.

Most of the genuine performers have gone through a learning curve starting as 'shy performer' before they can stand confidently in the stage area.

6.3.1 'Let me show up!'

Karaoke is more than a place where genuine performers seek fun and entertainment. It is an imaginative stage, which exists only in the performers' minds, where genuine performers can satisfy their desire of performing. They adore each and every detail during the process of consuming and demonstrating their music talent. When a genuine performer holding a microphone and sitting in front of a karaoke unit, undoubtedly it shows how yearning he or she has to sing. Their eagerness is translated into visible body gestures in the prelude of a song: setting the mood, tapping feet in rhythm, closing of eyes to focus, listening carefully to the music to catch the proper pitch, moving the body as a means to understand and appreciate the music, holding the microphone in the distinctive Andy Lau's (劉德華) style, etc. More tangible gestures can be easily observed during the course of singing, as they confidently put their singing skills at work to grab tunes and pitches

precisely, control breath and loudness accurately, as well as to manage the singing to express the sensual feel of the song etc.

'Let me show up!' is a statement genuine performers are keen to make in every karaoke session. This justifies the notion that this group of performers has a higher likeliness to be complained about their monopoly on the use of microphones. Based on the observed evidence and verbal illustration given by other karaoke participants, genuine performers tend to either speedily select a long list of their best performing songs soon after they have settled in a karaoke room or quickly lead the singing of most of the songs. It seems to be a very distinguishable inborn pattern of behavior of these singing-lovers, as natural as one flees in the heat of battle. One interviewee, who is a genuine performer, responded when being told about this:

"Trust me or not, I did not realize this problem until my friend had told me. It was embarrassing, indeed... better than not knowing though. I think it has become a natural reaction that I pick up the microphone immediately when the music starts."

We believe genuine performers try to be neither arrogant nor selfish. A subtle sensitivity to songs and karaoke seems to fairly explain their behavior, as both invoke their desire of performing. Another behavioral evidence is their heavy use of karaoke equipment during their visit. Most of the genuine performers do not or rarely use other available services in the karaoke which indicate their desire to maximize time and opportunity to sing and to perform. An interviewee had this to say about his use of karaoke service and on currently available karaoke services at large:

"I go straight to the control panel once I enter the karaoke room and start pressing the buttons on the remote control to choose my favorite songs. Nice to have some drinks to soothe my throat, but this is not a must in my case. I don't really care about the other things like buffet, access to the football games on Cable TV, the tarot fortune-telling trick... they all sound too gimmicky to me and the essence of karaoke is just not there. Honestly I don't think they should even exist in karaoke. Let's go back to the basic fundamental of karaoke, it is all about songs and singing, isn't it? I am even happy with a setting of just the stereo system and a chair."

Random karaoke goers would regard this opinion as too subjective and one-sided, yet it has successfully pointed out the primary element what singing-oriented visitors are going after and it verifies the proposed theoretical framework of this study that singing-oriented visitors are in general very into singing activity when they go to karaoke – the stereo unit is where they focus and consume their attention the most; they place a much lower value on all the other complimentary add-ons that are concurrently offered in karaoke.

Similarity of song preference is found among different genuine performers, with the entire selection of songs requiring sound level of singing skills. Confidence is the substance that distinguishes average singers from genuine performers. Most, if not all, are skillful and experienced amateur singers, literally free from the worries of being embarrassed by the quality of their singing. Therefore, genuine performers intentionally ignore songs that are easy to sing, or those chosen by singers whose singing skills are not highly regarded in general. Instead, they 'plan' their song lists carefully to include challenging songs (both old and new) so that they can showcase their talents. They are going after the highly-regarded

names like Jay Chou (周杰倫), Hacken Lee (李克勤), Faye Wong (王菲), Joey Yung (容祖兒), Leo Koo (古巨基), Andy Hui (許志安) etc., as if singing difficult songs will become their own trademark demonstrating their sophisticated qualities and singing ability. Genuine performers are also keen to sing different songs that bring out the different skills, and the opportunity of exposing their singing talent brings self-assurance emanating from the applauses of other people. Moreover, by singing and showing the good side of themselves in front of other people, the desire of performing is greatly satisfied.

Some confident genuine performers prefer the most challenging songs. They even benchmark themselves against professional singers by cloning the singing technique and style of the original singers, and measuring their level of satisfaction based on how identical their singing is to the original singers. Although most genuine performers agree that such quick and dirty benchmarking exercise is not the best way to mark one's singing talent, it leaves an immediate positive impression especially on those who may not have sufficient knowledge to judge their singing as professionals would.

On the other hand, genuine performers also seek (or initiate) chances to increase their 'profile' by commenting on the singing skills of professional singers and demonstrating advanced singing techniques in front of other karaoke participants. However, they do not often make negative or biased comments on professional singers, but generously sing their compliments and praises. Genuine performers love any kinds of serious discussion and analysis on singing as much as spending time conquering demanding singing skills such as using falsetto for example. The intention behind all these is neither about showing off nor bringing 'glory' to their names. Instead, genuine performers think it is more about

signifying that they are also sophisticated singers and know all about singing. They feel equally fulfilled after the 'talk' as if they have achieved another good performance. Their ultimate goals are to show up (as opposed to show off) – either through actual performance or concrete discussion – and let people know about their refined singing talent.

6.3.2 A singer's dream

While it seems to be an egg-or-chicken-first argument to most people: whether to start a career and learn the skills on the job, or to acquire the skills first and bring them to a relevant job, genuine performers are believers of the latter. A young informant in his early twenties has been dreaming of becoming a professional singer since he was thirteen or fourteen years old. He visits karaoke two to three times a week on average and he sings very well – he is just a typical genuine performer. He commented in a discussion on the possibility of his starting a singing career:

"It is a natural thought, I suppose. When you are very good at something, of course you want to build a career from there and make money out of it. I bet many people have the same idea, not just the young minds like me..."

There are trillions of successful businesses or careers being built upon the skills and talents of the owners, and undoubtedly this school of thought has gained tremendous recognition and approval spanning from academic scholars to veteran business owners. It is generally regarded as an asset and an advantage to a good career of possessing certain kind of skills and talents. This is especially true in show business where some level of talents often imply a better start.

This is a thought shared by the younger informants of this research study who are in their late teens or early twenties. They displayed the key characteristics of genuine performers – frequent karaoke visits, big fans of singing and preferred spending hours at karaoke than other activities. The distinguishing factors separating them from other genuine performers are the critical features that they are young, currently in the crossroad of deciding a career path to pursue and their dream is becoming a professional singer. They desire to build a successful career based on their singing talent, without underestimating the challenges prior to a singer's dream comes true. In the eyes of this group of young people, karaoke is more than a place where they can sharpen their singing skills, it is a place that gives hope – one day they may be hunted by talent scouts, the way a hidden gem is found in a mine. An excerpt from the comments made by this group of young 'dreamers':

"This sounds silly, but I always have a secret wish of being head-hunted by a producer or somebody in karaoke, like some artists and models being bumped into by those stranger talent scouts on the streets, and their lives were changed since then. I am not sure how it happens, but karaoke seems to be the place for this miracle to take place – otherwise how can they know if you sing good or not?"

This seems to justify an interesting finding of those passionate young singers taking karaoke as a place in where they 'invest' for their future career. 'Invest' is the exact word used by one informant, referring to his intended, more-than-frequent karaoke visits in order to practice singing and more importantly, to maximize his possibility of being spotted by talent seekers. The word 'invest' does not literally mean money only, it also includes the time and hope that he has invested to his dream of being a singer. The young

informants also realize that such 'investment' is not comparable to paying for formal vocational training in educational institutes. Nevertheless, to a certain extent the money and time these young informants spend on karaoke serve a similar purpose as vocational training and spending time in school does – buying a hope for a better future. In their opinion, this is a necessary, proactive action that they must take:

"Miracles will never happen if you just sit at the back of a room and wait. I'd rather take one step further to expose myself 'to the outside world' and expand my opportunity of meeting the right person who will give me a singing career."

This also explains the recent popularity of the television show, 'Minutes To Fame' (殘酷一叮), which has been shown since February 2005. Some contestants are drawn by the attractive cash rewards, while some really want to be in show business. There are also a few proven successful cases to keep their hopes alive.

Karaoke has been given a mission of orchestrating the marriage between these singers-to-be and professionals in the music industry. California Red and Neway Karaoke Box, the two major karaoke chains in Hong Kong, strategically incorporate such expectation in their marketing agenda and tactically manage it by constantly launching and/or being involved in singing quests of different types and scales. This is a sensible step for them to take, from both business and marketing points of view. It is because the association of karaoke to matchmaking (singers-to-be and music companies) well signifies the idea that karaoke is a place for singing practice and stars to be discovered. This can thus be translated into more revenue and a raise in profile that karaoke is more than merely a place of leisure and entertainment. For example, Neway Karaoke Box has sponsored a number of singing

quests organized by Emperor Entertainment Group, a local giant entertainment group with artist management and music production divisions. Although the former does not take the same approach, the endorsement and cash sponsorship also communicate the same idea. California Red offered a twisted version of singing quest in early 2005 at the launch of its new outlet at the APM mall. The APM mall is a heavily-invested and newly-developed giant retail establishment situated in the long-known industrial area (i.e. Kwun Tong), and its shops and outlets target younger customers by remaining open for longer hours. Tying up all these relevant factors, California Red launched a gimmicky marketing campaign to encourage young karaoke goers to visit this new outlet, sing and perform at their best, they might then run a chance of being selected by Fiona Sit – the fresh and young popular singer who would make sudden visits to their karaoke boxes, and award them with the best-singing award honors. The honor itself represented no practical value and it was not convertible to a singer's contract, but it gives very encouraging symbolic value for good performance.

6.3.3 A sense of success

Genuine performers admit a sense of pride comes from appreciation by others of their sophisticated singing talent. Having once been shy performers, the courage and confidence of singing in front of others without any worries or hesitation now bring a sense of success. To some of the genuine performers who consider themselves as not having enough achievements in other areas of their lives, the talent of singing is a 'weapon,' especially for protecting themselves from complaints and self-pity. Karaoke is a place they would visit to search for their lost confidence.

"Sometimes when I feel bad about myself, I would go to a karaoke and sing my lungs out. The more I hear of my singing, the better I feel. This is the thing I am proud of since I have put a lot of effort in training my singing skills, and this (author's note: i.e. singing well) is what I have gotten... I do not say that it is what I am emotionally relying on to stay positive. Just sometimes when people give me a hard time, I would sing or go to karaoke with friends... it seems to assure me that I am not that bad."

This is a note made by a twenty-three-year-old informant, who is now working in a small karaoke lounge as a disc jockey. Coming from a working family, he dropped out from school early and has changed a number of jobs in the last few years – from waiter to salesperson and office assistant – he gained no satisfaction from work, neither from family nor relationship. He also considered himself unsuccessful for lack of any specific skills, know-how or knowledge that would gain him minimal chance to pursue a professional career in this unforgiving world. Now being a disc jockey looks like an ideal job to have compared to all the previous ones as this job critically requires and leverages his singing talent. He also knows very well that he was given the job solely because of his performance in the (informal) singing test at the job interview. According to the informant, the position of disc jockey is one of the very few important roles in the setting of a small-scale karaoke lounge, considering that ambience is a critical factor in attracting business. Interior (which includes decoration and lighting) is one of the key elements of creating the right environment, yet it is considered to be less flexible and adjustable than songs and music, which can be easily changed in one wink of an eye.

In his current job, the twenty-three-year-old is responsible to manage the ambience of the premises by playing and singing popular songs on the karaoke machine. He has become a master of karaoke, in terms of both consumption and technical operation, due to his close partnership with and heavy utilization of the karaoke stereo system at work. He insists on maintaining at least fifty percent of songs being sung live by himself, and the rest being playbacks of original albums. Singing in front of a group of strangers does not bother him at all, as this is a given part of his job requirements; and he also agrees that people whom he does not know listening to him say, even brings him a sense of security and success that is not available elsewhere:

"All along I am so aware of the quality of my singing. When I sing well, which means I am good at what I am doing. I feel secure about myself... Compliment from audience is a real deal. You know lounge singers are always like a piece of furniture, normally audience just not paying any attention to you at all. If they are listening, oh wow! It implies that you sing well and your singing has grabbed them, and it makes me feel great because I have successfully grabbed their attention with my karaoke skills. It feels like I am successful here and my talent counts."

This story exhibits another example of karaoke as a medium that brings more than entertainment value but a functional significance of temporary self-enhancement. This statement applies especially well to those who possess fewer resources and advantages in the society, in terms of intellectual knowledge and competitiveness, hence social status. Failure in other aspects of life has imposed nothing but low self-esteem and disapproval on this group of people. Obviously, applause from audience members signifies an

empowering approval of the singing talent that the owner can be proud of. However, these genuine performers are not overwhelmed by the cheers that come from their admiring audience. They remain realistic that singing well does not mean widely recognized achievement by many others. Nonetheless, they take it as an injection of encouragement and comfort when a dose of confidence and assurance is needed.

6.3.4 The secret desire of melting the walls of the karaoke room

There is one thought shared among a significant number of informants who are categorized as genuine performers – to expose their performance to as many people as possible. A young singing lover admitted a wild but interesting secret thought of his, which points out the desire of genuine performers to show up in front of other people:

“I wish I could say a spell and melt down the walls of the karaoke room to the ground, so that I could sing loud and engage the gaze of everyone.”

Despite the many different rewarding benefits persuading these genuine performers to loyally visit karaoke and enthusiastically sing on the karaoke machine, they all appear to have a desire to advertise their brilliant singing talent to as many people as possible. This piece of information does not only shout the fact that they are advocates of individualism, it also vividly points out the importance of audience, and the insignificance of an enclosed area available in karaoke.

In the eyes of genuine performers, karaoke is not just an invention for leisure or a singing companion. It gives fulfillment – be it a satisfaction of the desire of performing, a hope for a

dream to come true or a sense of success out of a frustrating moment. However, these fulfillments do not happen without the existence of audience members who are there to admire the singing talents of the genuine performers. The audience members do not have to be physically present at all times. Attendance is required in situations where genuine performers desire to show up and be the focus of people, or that they seek approval and assurance. The chemical reaction takes place immediately after the performance when the audience members admirably praise the genuine performers either verbally or by brief approving peek. On the other hand, for the case of those aspiring to become singers, karaoke is seen more as a place of giving hope than one producing immediate satisfaction. The preferred audience members (that is, music producers or talent scouts) only need to make appearance in the mind of those genuine performers for them to live out their fantasy, albeit the physical presence of this particular group of audience is eagerly honored and welcomed.

The audience inside the same karaoke room is considered as another important element in the setting, after the karaoke stereo system, as their presence gives more sense to the imaginative stage, making the performance of the genuine performers a more satisfying one. As one informant noted:

"I am flattered when I hear a 'wow' from the audience when I sing."

Genuine performers equate praises from audience with spotlights, which make them shine like stars. Separation between the stage area and the audience area is more distinctive here. Apparently genuine performers enjoy this temporary, three-minute focus of attention, and they expect to receive more of it when they sing difficult songs. The degree of familiarity

with audience members is also an issue that genuine performers consider when choosing what songs to sing. Some deliberately choose only very challenging songs when they are in front of new friends and people whom they do not know well. An example put in by an informant:

"It is very common that friends bring (author added: their own) friends to any of these karaoke gathering, right? I didn't mean to test it on them, but sometimes when those new friends see me choose songs like 'Black Humor (黑色幽默)' (author note: a song that is known for its high demand of singing skills, by Jay Chou 周杰倫), even they do not show this explicitly on their face, I know I have wowed them already, way before I open my mouth to sing. It leaves a very good first impression."

Most of the genuine performers deny the importance of the enclosed space available in karaoke. This holds true to their desire of reaching out to as many people as possible with their singing talent, as both factors closely relate to one another. To genuine performers, the walls that separate one group of karaoke visitors from another have lost their role as a shelter as they are in the case of shy performers. Genuine performers wish the walls could be broken down and that their performance could be well seen. In fact, this thought does exist in their imagination, as admitted and explained by a few informants of their preference of shutting their eyes when they are singing:

"I close my eyes when I am very into my singing. It helps me focus. Some people think the story depicted in the music video leads you into the mood; well, I am not trying to be rude here but it certainly does not help at all. I prefer closing my eyes so it leaves me with plenty of room and freedom that I can focus on my singing technique, my breath,

etc. I can also pretend there is no wall around me, as if I were performing in an open space, with many people around watching me sing. This gives me the courage to sing loud. I find myself sing better in that way."

6.4 The shy performers

Shy performers are frequent karaoke visitors. They like singing and enjoy the satisfaction created by the singing experience. Similar to genuine performers, shy performers consider the singing equipment as the most important element in a karaoke room and their continued occupation with the karaoke equipments agrees with the fact that singing activity engages significant amount of time they spend in karaoke.

However, shy performers are not as 'open' as genuine performers and have rather 'complicated' minds – they are not confident about their singing skills, and are shy to sing in front of people. Although they enjoy the 'stage' experience, it only comes if they are encircled by a certain group of audience and if they stayed in an enclosed environment. The singing experience in karaoke is very personal to them and they are willing to share this only with people who are members of their private sphere of acquaintance.

A number of reasons explain why shy performers visiting karaoke – for releasing pressure and emotions, satisfying the desire of performing, practising singing skills, feeding souls and so on. These intangible (and more often spontaneous) needs are fulfilled through the physical act of singing, which is ideal in a karaoke room, with all the required professional equipments well set up so that singing cannot be any easier.

Shy performers are easily discerned among a group of random karaoke goers by their perceived preference of 'quiet' performance. They are active singers among peers whom they have developed close and comfortable relationship with, yet conservative in front of people they are not familiar with. An interesting proof of this tendency of shy performance

is their denial of singing as performance, even though they concede the fact that karaoke visits satisfy their desire of performing.

6.4.1 'I am not a performer!'

'Performer' is a term that most of the people in this category deny. It seems to be too grand a title to use. They want to be perceived as casual karaoke-goers instead. As put in by one of the informants when he was asked about how he liked the 'performance' of the song he had just sang:

'I am not a good performer, and I don't think I am performing. After all, karaoke is just for fun.'

However, this response does not always reflect the truth. Some subtle little acts displayed by the participants can magically reveal the reality that they are subconsciously taking singing as a kind of performance, be it formal or informal, and they want to make it as perfect as possible. During the system lag time between two songs or the phrase of music before the lyrics comes in, one can easily detect the signs on shy performers: sitting straight up, tuning microphone volume, listening carefully to the music, tapping feet in rhythm, adjusting voice to the proper pitch, etc. Another informant commented:

""Performer' is a term that puts me under pressure. It refers to those professionals, while I am not."

This explains the denial very well. The lack of confidence and the hidden worry of poor singing quality hold shy performers back from admitting their desire to be a 'true performer' and singing in front of people.

Although it is not necessary the case that shy performers do not sing well, most of the karaoke goers who fall into this category share a common characteristic of not being confident enough about their singing skills. They do not mind singing in front of people and it is no surprise to find that they in fact enjoy it very much. However, most of the time, shy performers only allow their desire for singing to flow freely within their comfort zone – which refers to people in their private circle of acquaintance. Singing among a group of close friends is not stressful at all, yet being with a group of strangers is another story. They avoid singing in front of people with whom they are not comfortably familiar, driven by an imaginary inside fear that the audience would leave the karaoke box because they sing so bad.

Having said that, shy performers still appreciate being the centre of attention and they enjoy the gratification of literally being ‘on the stage.’ This gives a certain degree of validation to the statement that shy performers are keen on making an appearance in the stage area. Being encircled by familiar faces is a significant factor for escalating the confident level of shy performers. A frequent karaoke-goer who used to sing out of tune expressed the satisfaction from the improvement of singing skills after undergoing some serious training in karaoke with one of his best friends:

“I took advantage of our friendship – I was so sure that I wouldn’t ruin the friendship even if I sang so bad and failed to reach those high notes.”

Obviously the guard is down when shy performers are surrounded by a group of friends. While a few of the informants admitted that they would give a thought on whom to go

karaoke with, most of them would choose not to bother on this subject. An informant remarked:

"I prefer going karaoke with friends who sing better than I do, then I can learn from them and they motivate me to improve my singing skills... it is just wiser than ending up performing so badly in front of people I am not close to."

6.4.2 Karaoke as an escape

Karaoke is unofficially registered as a place for retreat – very well an escape. People take karaoke as an alternative hiding place to disconnect from stressful, undesirable reality.

"Through imaginative uses, karaoke is transformed into a sort of therapeutic heaven where they can find relief from their isolated, humdrum routine' (Lum 1996).

This pertains to the two attributes of karaoke: first, it is an untypical means of communication that requires active involvement of participants to create unique meaning and experience; second, karaoke is a hub for songs and music videos, both are instruments that drive, depict and address emotions and feelings. These elements are not set to appease one's mind. Instead they evoke emotions from inside and diffuse a sense of empathy and compassion, especially when one attempts to relate them to a story in life. People can work off emotion and frustration by consuming songs and music videos and singing them out loud. This justifies the frequency and continuation of karaoke consumption.

"The first thing I did when I entered the karaoke room was to pick up the remote control and select a long list of songs. I did not pick my favorite songs as I always do, but any

songs that came up in my mind, sang my emotions out at that moment, and kept my mood... Tears went down my cheeks when the lyrics painfully touched my heart; and when the music videos recalled some sweet memories of the past, I smiled... I had no intention to stop, I took this as an indulgence, a 'mysterious space' for me to hide, and slip away from reality for a short while."

This is a narration of the experience of an informant who made a record of singing in a karaoke box alone for one whole week, every night from after work to 6 o'clock in the next morning after losing his long-time love as she had met someone else and left. He preferred karaoke to many other places as his getaway at that period of time (when he described as the lowest point in his life) because the songs played a functional role in generating resonance and making him feel that his cry was well heard – this was exactly the kind of consolation he was looking for. Karaoke also required a high level of involvement: by singing out (and practically studying) the lyrics word by word and consuming the music video, thus enhanced the heart-touching experience.

This idea can be well illustrated by the few examples cited by the informant. As he recalled the moment when he sang 'On the Same Day Next Year' ('明年今日' by Eason Chan 陳奕迅), he was immediately grabbed by the similarities between his experience and the scenes that the song depicted. It spoke his heart out in a straightforward and precise manner:

"Since now you are asking me specifically which lines of lyrics moved me the most – I think, the song as a whole sounded very tear-jerking... I felt for it, really, because I was in no better situation than he (Eason Chan, the singer) was. I knew I had exactly the same sad look as he did in the music video."

Then he recited (sang) the lyrics and noted the lines towards which he had developed very strong feelings:

(1) '若這一刻我竟嚴重痴呆 跟本不需要被愛 永遠在床上發夢 餘生都不會再悲哀' (translation: I don't need love if one day I lose my mind. I would just stay in bed making dreams for the rest of my life and I would have no more grief);

(2) '人總需要勇敢生存 我還是重新許願 例如學會承受失戀' (translation: I have to be brave and move on. Once again I make a wish that I would be able to bear this heartbreaking pain);

(3) '明年今日... 如果有幸會面 或在同伴新婚的盛宴 惶惑地等待你出現' (translation: on the same day next year...if lucky enough I have a chance to see you again, it may be in a friend's wedding, and I will yearningly wait to see you there)

There is no complicated translation or apprehension of messages required. Though the events or stories communicated through lyrics and music videos may not coincidentally happen in the exact way in real life, audience would quickly grasp a sense of empathy or resonance because they have shared the similar experience. Those thoughts and feelings are the medium for creating drama in their heart and mind. By singing the songs out loud, they can work off the emotion, thus making the karaoke visit a 'healing' experience.

The abundant supply of popular songs in karaoke is certainly a credit to this type of shy performers. They feel relieved by knowing that their hearts are spoken to and their voices are covered through the messages delivered by popular songs. Therefore, having an access

to songs in different themes, stories, genres, moods, etc. is certainly a plus for these escapers. Karaoke has a resourceful song library (of more than 20,000 songs) with a bundle of songs featuring the journey of love from beginning, continuing, struggling to ending. Songs that focus on the sadness from deteriorating relationships could even make a standalone genre by themselves because of their spread of variety – from lost love to the idea of love that cannot last out, from the mix of love and hate to the feeling of love crumbling away. With no hassle at all shy performers can choose any songs that well represent their moods and feelings from the pool of songs available at karaoke.

When asked why choose karaoke box over pubs or lounges where karaoke facilities are also available, the respondent gave credit to the privacy given in karaoke 'box':

"It is because of the absolute freedom I can enjoy in a karaoke box: I can sing the songs I like, one after another without even stopping or feeling embarrassing because somebody out there is waiting to sing. I am the king there, I can do whatever I feel like, knowing that nobody is watching. It makes me feel safe."

Apparently escapers desire to display self-centeredness and to be temporarily cut-off from the outside world. Karaoke box satisfies the requests by offering space, freedom and a sense of security.

Although both are well perceived as getaway options, karaoke produces a different experience than a spa. One would consider spa as a retreat for a moment of relaxation and peace, while karaoke as a refuge to release emotion through singing out loud in an

enclosed area. The songs, the music videos and the enclosed space come together as a perfect setting for sympathetic resonance and a good level of privacy.

While it is a common phenomenon that miserable people would look for places like pubs and bars where alcoholic drinks are offered, shy performers who prefer 'healthier' time out at karaoke do not agree with this:

"What can drinking bring to the table? Nothing, right? It is just about paying a lot of money for an unconscious mind for a night or so. I don't feel I am heard, and it does not soothe you at all, I can imagine how sick I would be after being drunk. Even singing is not a problem-solver, drinking would just make the situation worse. Having said that, one glass or so would be nice, yet definitely not to the point of getting me drunk."

Another type of escapers is the ones who are under stressful lives. This is not a rare case especially to the 'work-hard-play-hard' type who lives a hectic and demanding modern life as in Hong Kong. Karaoke is a popular time-out alternative to shopping, working out, going to beaches, etc., that people would go about during their personal time. People who visit karaoke, like the other type of escapers mentioned above, are actively seeking ways to shed off pressures and frustrations that they have come across at work and/or in their personal lives. While agreeing that spending time in a karaoke room does not lead to expectation that problems are magically solved, three elements count when it comes to letting out pressures and frustrations and making one feel relaxed. They are music, an enclosed area and the act of singing.

As we all agree that music creates ambience, this explains very well the reason why shopping malls, bars, nightclubs, fitness centers, hotels, airlines, restaurants and other retail outlets play music during their business hours to attract customers and influence their behavior, thus increase turnover and profits. Instead of being an add-on as it is in all the above-mentioned locations, music is perceived as a given element in a karaoke setting. In a karaoke room, one has the absolute freedom to choose the ambience in which one wants by selecting the music that perfectly harmonizes with their mood; compared to other venues such as shopping malls and gymnastic centers where one is subjected to any music that comes through the general speakers.

An enclosed room delivers a sense of privacy. While many regard chatting and sharing with people whom they trust as a way to release negative emotions and energy from their bodies, karaoke provides a space allowing private chat among friends, as the rooms themselves serve as a 'protective barrier' to physically separate one group of people from another. The availability of various room sizes can put up even a group of only two. All these serve as a favorable setting to accommodate the needs of private chats among karaoke goers who are 'on escape.'

Singing, like taking deep breath, is considered to be a very good way to soothe one's soul. The action itself involves (1) taking in the contents of the songs, (2) mind processing and interacting with the embedded message by relating one's subjective feelings, experiences and reasoning to the songs, and (3) presenting the song in one's own, unique interpretation. The second and the third steps are critical in healing especially for shy performers who are 'on escape'. For this type of escapers aims to sing away all worries from their stressful lives,

the contents, the mood and the flavor that the songs are featuring do not necessary have to coincide with the headache issues they are currently facing. There is no tendency or pattern of what kind of songs would work best with any specific mood or emotion, as it varies among individuals. Some of them prefer depressing songs about failure when they are frustrated, while some prefer hyperactive upbeat songs that bring them good mood.

“Sometimes it is hard to find songs that so intimately speak to our hearts. Don’t even sweat on that, I would suggest you save your energy for singing! Back to those days we had Sam Hui throwing all the complaints of life in his songs, most of the popular songs nowadays focus on relationship. Anyhow, I am happy with whatever songs I have, as long as I can sing.”

6.4.3 ‘It makes me feel good about myself!’

To some ‘seasoned’ shy performers, they would deliberately choose songs that require singing skills and techniques. Karaoke provides a ground for them to practice, thus help them build confidence through constant and measurable improvements in their singing skills. A karaoke room can be interpreted as an equivalence to a driving range for golfers. It is a step that performers take to arm themselves with good singing skills before they move on to show their talents off in front of the public.

Shy performers who share this thought are usually serious karaoke goers and they make regular or even frequent visits to karaoke. In general, they are more driven than other karaoke visitors. This is not only because they like singing, but also because they have an

inside goal to achieve. The following statement was made by an interviewee who claims he spent about five percent of his time everyday singing:

"I do not just focus on the music or what it is all about when I listen to songs, I also try to learn the way the singers present the songs, particularly technical skills such as when to take breaths or so... and I will practice at karaoke."

It does not mean that this type of karaoke goes only make singing practices happen at karaoke. In fact, it is incorporated into their daily lives and can take place anywhere (and this accounts for that five percent) – bathing, walking, working, etc. – in more a casual, easy and relaxed way. When singing takes place in a karaoke setting, it is viewed more formally as singing practice, mainly because of the availability of karaoke equipments in the rooms that people can make good use of. Unlike music studios that are equipped with professional setup and sophisticated technology, karaoke offers basic yet proper equipments and facilities that are sufficient for amateur singing and accessible by the general public at affordable budgets; sometimes even professional singers find it a cost-effective alternative to studios. This explains the popularity of karaoke as a place for singing practices.

They perceive karaoke as more than a mere entertainment driver, but as an agent by which they can possibly develop a talent which is well and widely recognized. The singing activity does not bring too much entertainment value, yet it is more about sharpening singing skills and building confidence. The entertaining part probably comes from the joy and satisfaction in singing some difficult songs in tune, or improvement in the overall singing quality, which at the end makes singers feel good and happy about themselves.

"I have conquered difficult songs, and am better at manipulating my voice. I feel so good about that. It didn't happen overnight. In fact I had gone through endless trials and failure. But I made it! Now I am more freewheeling in picking songs at karaoke, even the difficult ones. "

"People would admire you even if it is just a mediocre performance. You don't have to sing very well, just above the average, you will get the applause."

The above comments reveal the functional roles of karaoke through the perceived values and benefits of skills improvement and psychological enhancement that shy performers can develop from karaoke 'training.' Karaoke serves as an indicator of improvements in one's singing skills, as the improvements can be measured in a tangible manner by one advancing from an easy-to-sing song to a more demanding one. Such measurement, of course, is not based on a professionally established, well-recognized objective structure, yet a rather informal and subjective one with ranks established based on general perception of the singing skills of pop singers. For example, on a spectrum of one to five, if we say that the singing skills of the girls' group Twins is generally regarded as at level one, then Gigi Leung (梁詠琪) is at level two to three and the veteran singer Jacky Cheung (張學友) is at level five. Though subjective, such rankings of singing skills are in general accepted by most people, based on the evaluation of daily performances of these pop singers that the public received through the mass media. Therefore, a sense of satisfaction is developed when shy performers have graduated from the songs of Twins to those of Gigi Leung, and the satisfaction elevates when shy performers move on to higher levels. The 'applause' that shy performers will get from singing above-average is an ambition they work toward, and they consider karaoke as a means to help them achieve the goal.

7 Conclusion

The research starts out with a conceptual framework, which categorizes four different types of karaoke goers – *socializers*, *genuine performers*, *shy performers* and *visitors* – based on their functional utilization of core and peripheral services offered in a karaoke, in relation to his/her degree of acquaintance with other karaoke participants. This thesis documents the different patterns of consumption demonstrated by each type of karaoke goers and reveals how the offerings of this commercial means of entertainment are deployed in order to produce ‘customized’ satisfactions. Detailed ethnographic description on their behavior, expectation and motivations on this means of communications is revealed through qualitative based interviews, observation and active participation.

The research results reveal the fact that karaoke as a part of the popular culture provided as a profit-generating commercial service, producing not only entertainment but other values and satisfactions to users. The key elements of which karaoke is composed also produce different meanings to different users.

Socializers and *visitors* share certain qualities with each other, so do *genuine performers* and *shy performers*. The degree of acquaintance among participants nonetheless is the watershed to identify the distinctive features of each, so then justifies once again the significance of the conceptual framework.

This study serves as a proprietary case study of the use of karaoke in Hong Kong, refreshing the scene that has been set by the current researchers – Lum, Chen and the

league – by being the first to approach from the angle of the influences made by other participants on the functional utilization of karaoke offerings. While both Chen and Lum focus on how immigrants employ karaoke to construct identity in a foreign community, this research shed light on how this means of entertainment is used to create identity within one’s own culture. Moreover, the consumer-oriented nature of this research has also created much attention from industry practitioners as a valid reference of consumer behavior.

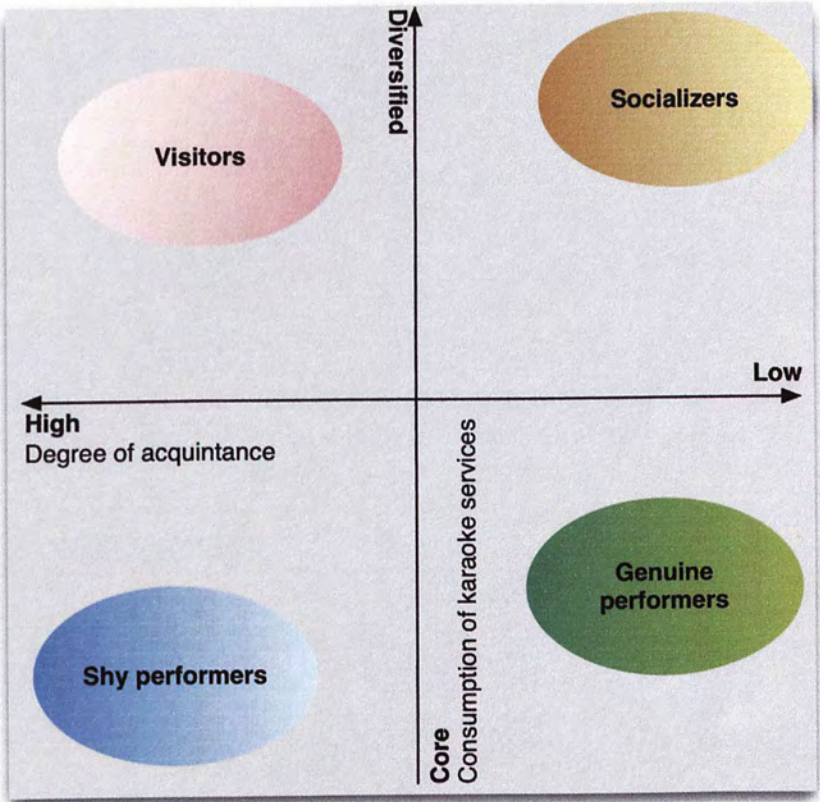
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9 Appendix

Graph 1 Theoretical framework



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